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An affirmative team doesn't hide negatives

You can almost hear what Ford's coaches were telling him just before his musical-chairs announcement of changed jobs in the administration. They said, "Give it an affirmative aspect, say you just wanted your own team, don't get into the negative business of any faults in those you fired."

He trudged down the hall, telling himself, "Keep it on the affirmative side. Affirmative. Affirmative." Ford does not even translate advice to him into the appropriate answers to others. He just repeats the advice. To one of the first questions asked him, he said, "I put it on the affirmative side that they are my choices." His team.

He was so programmed to stress the affirmative, to accentuate the positive, that the word kept popping out in the oddest places: "Let me state affirmatively that Secretary Kissinger has done a superb job." His stress on the team concept was even more recurrent — he used the term 13 times, occasionally coming back to it like a toy train on a small track:

"I think any president has to have the opportunity to put together his own team. They were kept on when I assumed office because I wanted continuity. But any president, to do the job that's needed and necessary, has to have his own team in the area of foreign policy. I believe that team that I have assembled, as I have indicated tonight, will do a first-class job."

The two concepts were linked in his mind, and one

often pulled the other forward: "I think it's important that a president has that kind of team on an affirmative basis." That was A pulling B. Here is B pulling A: "I have affirmatively answered the question by saying I wanted my own team." And then more A-leads-to-B: "The team and the organizational structure to carry out an affirmative, successful foreign policy." And again: "I indicated that the team I put together will affirmatively satisfy the way I want an organizational structure set up."

All this stress on the positive just emphasized the Ford team's belief that there was plenty of negative stuff to be ignored, evaded or denied. So, when pinned down, Ford said the Kissinger-Schlesinger split had nothing to do with choosing his affirmative team — which is impossible. And said that Rumsfeld took no part in arranging the shuffle — which is implausible. And that he has no worries about Reagan — which is unimaginable.

The timing was a negative factor. So were the leaks. The changed sequence of announcements. The fact that Schlesinger and Colby did not ease things by taking face-saving appointments. The fact that Rockefeller, his announcement upstaged by the leaks on Colby and Schlesinger, withdrew with so little grace. There was a lot to paper over with rote affirmative talk and cheers for the team.

Was Kissinger promoted, or demoted; or did he stay pretty much where he was? He was promoted, all right

— to the position of No. 1 dumpable.

Rockefeller held that spot until the shifts came. Even Ford was not out-Reaganning Reagan. Rockefeller's attempts to do that just looked silly. So, sooner or later, Ford had to dump him. It did not do him much good right now. Earlier or later would have been better. But Rockefeller had to see this coming, and get restive; so it was now.

With that excuse for opposition to Ford gone, the right wing will have to find another excuse; and the Schlesinger dismissal hands them a big one — detente. Somewhere down the line, Ford will have to throw another body off the sled — and all the recent moves just fatten up Kissinger for that role.

Consider. Elliot Richardson, who has publicly declared himself a spectacular choice to succeed Kissinger, has returned to the scene of the action. Donald Rumsfeld, a quiet fighter against Kissinger, is given an independent role that must eat into the secretary of state's. George Bush, Rumsfeld's pal, is at the CIA, now taken out of Kissinger's direct control as head of the National Security Council.

Rockefeller and Kissinger each canceled engagements to have lunch together the day after the "massacre."

They no doubt had a lot to talk about, not much of it affirmative. One had just been thrown to the wolves, and the other had been edged toward the back of the sled.